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Assaulting Mt. Helicon: Writing and Current Affairs.

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CAN PERMACULTURE FEED BRITAIN?

I was elated to find the embedded BBC documentary on YouTube. *A Farm for the Future* (2009) looks at modern farming's dependence on fossil fuels– be it organic farming or not– and the problems this dependence causes.

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Colin Campbell is probably the top expert on 'Peak Oil' and I was pleasantly surprised to see him featured in this documentary. I can't recommend his writing highly enough. Dr. Campbell's ideas have met resistance in financial and government circles for two reasons: 1) it's not yet clear how the powers that be will share the profits from peak oil 2) peak oil has a lot of ugly, unpopular consequences. Therefore, there's no first-mover advantage in addressing the oil-problem and Dr. Campbell's warnings are not welcome.

It would be foolish to expect any leadership from government on the issue of oil-dependent farming. It's painful to admit that we just can't feed all the people we have. Yet, that' exactly the problem at hand. Modern farming is unsustainable, but modern cities were grown to be fed this way.

The second point of gloom is that we've waited too long to develop alternative energy sources. It takes energy to make energy, and cheap oil was our chance to transition to energy sources that are more efficient. Solar power, wind energy, wave energy, nuclear (cough) aren't going replace crude oil.

Any way you cut it, we're all going to have to figure out how to survive on something closer to 1850s-style agriculture. That's not recycling newspaper, nor is it running a 400-horse-power tractor on biodiesel, nor is it spraying 1/8 as much as usual with an FDA-approved-organic fungicide. 1850s agriculture means a lot more farmers, smaller farms, a few horses per farm, only using materials that are available within a few miles of the farm and **drastically reduced output**.

A Farm for the Future tries to offer some innovative alternatives to current farming practices, which is both a strength and weakness of this documentary. It's refreshing to hear some rational thinking about food sustainability; but there's little analysis of alternative food production options, and even less thought about the unavoidable consequences of sustainable farming. There are just too many people, and *nothing* about *any* Western-inspired social policy is calibrated to deal with that.

So, according to the producer Rebecca Hosking, what are the best alternative food production options?

Woodland gardens and 'permaculture': Woodland gardens are food-producing gardens that rely on indigenous ecosystems to support a range of foods: like berries, chestnuts, mushrooms. Permaculture is a slightly more organized implementation of the same idea. The thinking farmer's consensus is that the only *sustainable* way of feeding ourselves is foraging– or something very close to foraging.

As I've written before, the concept of foraging is appealing to me. Last week was morel season on our farm and it's easy to get romantic about feeding yourself from a cozy woodland plot. *A Farm for the Future* shares this romanticism, and there is no shortage of permaculture-enthusiasts making predictions about how one acre of forest *might* feed 10 people with only 10 days of maintenance labor a year, etc.

But the truth is, for 95% of the year, woodlands produce very little food that humans can eat, and left to its own devices, our 10 acres of forest can just about support 3-4 deer and a family of foxes. The same limitations apply to hedgerows. While hedgerows are pretty, you need a lot of blackberries, thistles and mulberries to feed a grown man. I'

collected from our hedges for a few years now, and even with 'careful steering', a hedge is not going to make a dent in your grocery bill. And they *certainly won't* with only 10 days of labor per year maintaining them!

To put that in perspective, back before European farming technology, the entire landmass of North America supported somewhere between 3-10 million American Indians. Now the US population alone is around 310 million. Obviously, the amount of land hasn't grown.

If there isn't thirty times as much land, have forests become thirty times more efficient? Woodland evolved over millions of years. It's a *very* efficient system, but a small acreage (like 10) is maxed out at a few deer, foxes and even fewer humans. There is a natural limit to the productivity of woodland.

Therefore, woodland gardens probably aren't the answer to our oil-crisis, even though the idea is attractive. I don't believe there is a pretty answer and while *A Farm for the Future* tackles some thorny problems head on, it skirts the ugly issue of malnutrition– or, let's face it, starvation. 310 is a lot larger than 3. What are places such as Paris, London, New York or L.A. going to look like when the food runs out?

While we have way too many people to feed, we don't have enough of the right type of people to make oil-free farming work. Hocking believes that we couldn't go back to 1850s style farming even if we wanted to, because the knowledge has been lost and farmers aren't as physically strong as they used to be. Her elderly neighbor Pearl, who is probably the most valuable resource in the documentary after Dr. Campbell, describes how farming was done when there were just men and horses. Families of owner-operators worked all day doing manual labor for little pay, outside the value of their land and a healthy lifestyle. Pearl liked living this way, because although the work was hard, it was productive work that made her feel good.

The farming lifestyle is 180 degrees from what many working people are used to now: namely bureaucracies where responsibility and initiative are discouraged. And that's just the *working* population. People can get strong quickly if they need to, but their attitudes take a lot longer to change. How many college grads who *ought* to be in the fields are actually going to be happy working there?

So, while *A Farm for the Future* is a great documentary, it doesn't answer– or even seriously attempt to answer– the title question of this post. The message is this: we can't go on as we have been. *Nobody* can, because a lot of the second and third world depends on cheap American grain.

1 COMMENT

FEDERAL REGISTER

Help Shaun help you.

I am happy to report that an excellent news source has got better. If you don't already read the US government publication, *Federal Register*, you should start reading it now. This is probably the last real news source in the USA, and the information contained therein is straight from the horse's mouth.

Federal Register's new website is easy to navigate and I even think the writing has improved. Back under the Bush II administration, I read *Fed Reg* religiously: it was emailed to me every morning and was a mess of small print, bureaucratese and slow links.

When Obama came to power, my Fed Reg emails disappeared for several months– I'm not sure how long, but long enough for me to stop looking for the information. Sometime in the interim, brave souls in Washington updated and improved the last real window onto the administration. Thank you!

Fed Reg's executive orders, agency regulations and calls for public comment make excellent reading and provide information that you're not going to get anywhere else. Not *anywhere* else.

Take, for instance, what I found out this morning. HUD is paying to relocate people out of slums and into rural communities, through extending a set of three programs called "Continuum of Care".

I thought that a program like this must exist, because for the last few years a number of families have moved out of the depressed city-centers in our region and into the small town where I live. There aren't many low-skill job opportunities in my area, and the jobs that exist are seasonal. Unsurprisingly, many of these new residents are under- or unemployed. All this begs the question, why did they move in? Who paid for their relocation?

Search for "Continuum of Care" on Huff Po, Washington Post, NYT or The Wall Street Journal and *marvel* at the quantity of in-depth

reporting. This constellation of programs has received billions of dollars, yet no mainstream journalist seems to be following it.

But there is a ray of hope: HUD published a proposal to change the programs in the *Federal Register*. You still have eight days (as of posting) to comment on these changes.

Read all about the proposed changes here. (If the link is broken, the name of the publication is "Homeless Emergency Assistance and Rapid Transition to Housing: Rural Housing Stability Assistance Program and Revisions to the Definition of "Chronically Homeless"".

Perhaps unsurprisingly, you'll find that HUD is focusing on moving people into rural communities with populations of 10,000 or less, with emphasis on communities with less than 5000 inhabitants.

HUD only wants *Continuum* money to go to local government bodies, as applicants "must either be a county government or a designee of the county government that agrees to represent the county." Only one applicant can apply for these funds per county, because that makes it easier for HUD to watch how the money is spent.

HUD's chosen the perfect avenue to fund *Continuum*, because local government is the only entity that stands to benefit financially from moving distressed families into rural communities. HUD can be sure that the greed motive is working in their initiative's favor.

True to the cynical nature of US politics, Continuum of Care particularly targets minority communities for relocation:

> *This section further provides that a displaced person must be advised of his or her rights under the Fair Housing Act and,* ***if the comparable replacement dwelling used to establish the amount of replacement housing payment to be provided to a minority person is located in an area of minority concentration, the minority person must be given, if possible, referrals to decent, safe, and sanitary replacement dwellings not located in such areas that are within their financial means.*** *(See 49 CFR 24.205(c)(2)(ii)(D)). This section also addresses the process of initiating negotiations where the displacement is a result of privately undertaken rehabilitation, demolition, or acquisition of real property.*

For readers unfamiliar with US politics, in practice this proposal means relocating minorities out of minority areas and into white ones. Seeing as rural, white communities are more likely to vote, say, *Republican* or even *Tea-Party*, it's easy to see sinister motives behind HUD's relocation priorities.

Is HUD really trying to help homeless people or are they trying break up urban, minority communities to make way for developers and gentrification? Gee, look what's happening in DC. When I lived in NYC, the local government's policy was to move benefits-dependent families out of up-and-coming Manhattan neighborhoods, and send them to rural communities Upstate. Not only does this make the relocated-families politically dispossessed and socially isolated, but it shoves the cost of decades of failed social policies off onto rural communities– exactly the communities that can least afford it.

HUD's secretary, Shaun Donovan, is a Harvardite who's made a career for himself in New York public housing: both as an academic and a private sector financier. Rest assured America, this is a man who understands housing inside out. (I will remind readers that HUD came away from the 2008 sub-prime loan crisis with a lot of egg on their collective face. Five years later and they've found a way to grab more pork!)

I predict that the USA will follow South America's lead: a nucleus of rich neighborhoods near city-centers, surrounded by a ring of slums. Oh yeah, and no group will be concentrated enough in any voting district to protect their own interests.

But that need only be the future if community leaders don't stand up to local government officials who want to take HUD's money. I would urge every minority community that doesn't want to end up like Harlem to fight this program. I would urge every rural community that doesn't want to end up bankrupt and dispossessed to fight too.

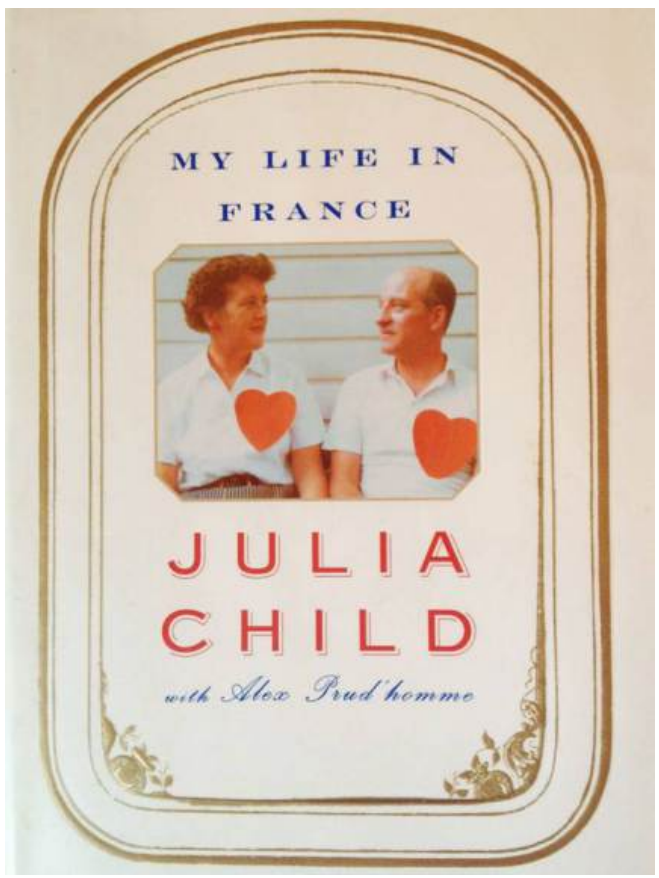
All this info from 15 minutes of reading *Federal Register*!

Oh, if you'd like more information on how the Federal Government is shoving the cost of failed social policies onto rural areas, read up on the Work Opportunity Tax Credit. I know a single mother who lost her job because somebody from Chicago bought the store where she worked and wanted to claim the WOTC's $2,400 tax credit by busing in an ex-felon from a neighboring city. (I guess the credit can reach up to $9,600.) Get a full list of workers subsidized by the WOTC here.

All this at a time when people who follow the rules are struggling to find work and meet their mortgage payments. Where's the justice in that?

LEAVE A COMMENT

MY LIFE IN FRANCE, THE HAUNTED WOOD



See the construction-paper hearts? That means love.

I guess that we live in an interesting time: people are shaking off the idealistic dreams of their grandparents (maybe even great-grandparents) and looking at what's left in the gray light of dawn.

The problem with any time of dogmatic belief– and that is what I believe the last 80 or so years have been– is that it ends in a sort of flight from reality, as the notions that people have come to live by are turned on their heads. The flight continues until it's just too painful.

"Painful flight" are the two words that sprung to my mind as I read Marjorie Kehe's *Christian Science Monitor* review of Jennet Conant's *A Covert Affair*:

> *It's [*A Covert Affair *is] also a useful reminder that, in the America that finally emerged from the Cold War, the Childs are still beloved icons, while Joseph McCarthy endures only as a symbol of shame.*

I'm not reviewing Jennet's book today. I'm reviewing two others: Julia Child's *My Life in France*, and *The Haunted Wood*, by Weinstein et alia. The first is a glowing, self-congratulatory, PR piece written by someone with a lot to hide; the second provides a glimpse into what Julia was hiding.

There have been a lot of 'revelatory' books over the past couple of decades. I'm thinking of books like *The CIA and the Cultural Cold War*, *Blacklisted by History* and, to a certain extent, *The Haunted Wood*. I'm not saying that any of their authors are heroes, just that these books deal with information that is painful for America's elite. And naturally, some intellectuals have flown from the consequences of this information, since it challenges their cherished beliefs about themselves and the people they admire.

I knew someone who worked for one of the preeminent news channels in New York City. When *Blacklisted by History* came out, his station chief– who was Jamaican, not American– refused to cover it because, well, McCarthy was the bad guy and that's that.

With all that's happened over the past 40 years, Mr. Jamaica's attitude is no longer tenable. Governments have come and gone; and more contenders are vying for a slice from a shrinking pie. That means somebody's going away disgruntled and sacred cows will fall.

Which brings me to the Childs.

It's time to face the fact that the Childs worked for an illegal organization, the OSS. Why do I say illegal? Because both Churchill and Roosevelt overstepped their power and went behind the back of their respective governments when they collaborated secretly with Bill Stephenson (a businessman/British spy) and J. Edgar Hoover to form their personal espionage apparatus.

For all the murkiness surrounding espionage, no one has challenged that Stephenson was a British agent and the FDR relied on his advice when he put Donovan, Stephenson's buddy, at the head of the OSS. Let me rephrase that: FDR relied on a British spy to set up the clearing house for US intelligence. In his biography, Stephenson claims he even had special instructions regarding his spy-work in the USA: he was to drum up the resources that Churchill needed for war.

I'd hate to deal with the counter-espionage fallout from those OSS hires. Maybe that's why Angleton went crazy.

The Childs worked for the OSS– Julia worked directly for Donovan—in full knowledge that what they were doing was to be kept secret from the American public to prevent interference from Congress. According to Stephenson, the OSS's war-time doings were kept secret until the early 60s, when Kim Philby's defection threatened to blow the whole story wide open. Why *still* hide 20 years after this 'benevolent' organization was disbanded? Because the OSS, far from being humanitarian-good-guys, had undermined the balance of powers and rule of law to implement Churchill and FDR's private goals. That's treachery.

It gets uglier, because Stephenson's boys were tasked with digging dirt on Americans who opposed British interests. This encompassed making up rumors and fabricating evidence of spy plots. (Sorta like McCarthy.)

The Haunted Wood has added a new dimension to the OSS story, gleaned from Soviet information sources. From its very beginning, the OSS had a close working relationship with the NKGB, which was the USSR's foreign intelligence service. Julia's boss, William Donovan, was the key player organizing this partnership; though it appears that OSS'ers gave the NKGB more information than they got in return. The NKGB side had contempt for the amateurishness of the OSS. As you might expect, the collaboration allowed the NKGB to 'penetrate' Donovan's organization. (Read about it in Chapter 11.)

The NKGB/OSS partnership was kept secret from the American public too, on the advice of J. Edgar Hoover, because he knew that making it official would invite interference from Congress. That pesky rule of law again.

So instead, the NKGB/OSS partnership was kept informal– and personal:

> *That month, the USSR's Ambassador to the United States, Konstantin Umansky, informed the NKVD of a recent private conversation with Treasury Secretary Henry Morgenthau. He quoted Morgenthau, an FDR confidant, as asking "not on behalf of the American government but on my personal behalf to give me and Roosevelt the heads of German agents in the US… (1941)*

The OSS: secretly commandeering government resources for personal vendettas. That's what despotism looks like, and didn't we get rid of Mussolini, Hitler, etc. because they were despots? The answer-on-the-street is usually affirmative. So why keep Stalin? We had capable generals ready and willing to march on Moscow. Weinstein's book sheds some light on the thorny reasons behind that ugly history.

Did Paul Cushing Child's illegal work stop once the OSS was disbanded? It seems not. According to Julia, in 1954 Paul was an important US propaganda operative:

> *His title was exhibits officer for all of Germany, which meant he was America's top visual-program man for the entire country. His job was to inform the German people about the U.S.A., and once again he was organizing exhibits, tours, and cross-cultural exchanges. Because of the geopolitical/propaganda importance of Germany, which was right smack up against the Iron Curtain, his department had a budget of ten million dollars a year, more than the combined budgets for all of the USIA's other information programs around the world.*

Paul worked with the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) to bring its exhibits to the German public. All this at exactly the time the CIA was (in secret from Congress) working with MOMA to promote a non-Communist left agenda in Europe.

And what about Paul? Was he promoting the same agenda? According to Julia, at least one French politician thought so:

> *Counsul General Heywood Hill– whom Abe Manell called 'Hill the Pill'– took Paul to meet the local préfet, Monsieur Paira. Wreathed in a cloud of smoke behind a rococo desk outfitted with three important looking telephones, Paira, a jowly Corsican, opened the meeting by attacking the USIS for attacking the Communists instead of informing French people about the U.S.A.*

(The USIA was formerly called the USIS.)

The chances are good that Paul followed his old OSS contacts– and their money– into the non-Communist left foray that Frances Stonor Saunder's book made so famous. *Yet another* secret operation kept hidden from Congress to avoid the rule of law.

I see a pattern here, and it isn't one that makes me love the Childs. Who were this couple?

To answer that question, you have to read between the lines of Julia's book, but not much. They're the type of people who laugh at the French for sucking up to aristocrats, but change their cat's name from "Minnette" to "Minnette Mimosa McWilliams Child" when they find out the feline's a rare breed, not just a mutt. They're the type of people who travel war-ravaged Europe eating, oblivious to the malnutrition around them. They detest money and privilege, but seek it out wherever they can. They're hypocrites.

What strikes me most about this couple is their incongruity. Roald Dahl and his wife, Patricia Neal, made a show of their 'perfect marriage' to the press; Julia is eager to do the same. Julia presents herself as a doting housewife, she presents Paul as her rock, and inspiration, and teacher, and indulgent husband. When Paul speaks in his own writing, however, he comes across as someone who's settled for money. Paul is creepy. For instance, he wrote to his twin that Paris with Julia pleased him, because it reminded him of having lipstick on his belly-button. In photographs, Mr. Child's eyes have a touch of the same human kindness shown by Goebbels and Richard Perle. (Remember that meme?)

Paul is more interesting than Julia. He seems to have done a bit of everything at one time or another. An American, Paul grew up with his widowed mother in France– a place he disliked at the time– then started to travel the world because he didn't have money for college. (Work that one out.) Paul, at different times, was a stained-glass-window artisan, a low-level Hollywood employee, an OSS agent in Sri Lanka (then British Ceylon), a *something* on a China Sea command ship in World War II, a War-Room designer for the British General Mountbatten, a USIA propagandist/State Department affiliate, a cocktail-socialist, a photographer, a dandy, a parasite off Julia's money. Take your pick, he seems to have.

Julia's memoir starts with her and Paul barreling towards Paris in a huge American car along a road built by the US Army Corps of Engineers. That's a perfect metaphor for Julia's life. Barreling toward prestige at the

taxpayer's expense.

But don't think that means she likes America, quite the contrary. She despises Pasadena, California (where she's from), and falls deeper and deeper in 'love' with France. She *adores* France… until the day she decides that France is too much like Pasadena, and moves permanently to Cambridge, MA.

Why does Julia hate the place where she is from? Well, it's filled with Republicans, Nixon-voters, housewives, people who are only concerned with their own comfort… her father.

Julia's relationship with her father is the most interesting relationship in her book. Her father really got under her skin, ostensibly because he hated her for not marrying a Republican banker. I've heard many Cambridge-types lambast their enemies as "GOP" when they don't want to talk about about why they *really* don't like a person. In Julia's case, her Dad thought that she and Paul were dangerously isolated in their socialist milieu, and that they had lost touch with their homeland.

Consider Julia's choices from her father's perspective: his daughter meets an older man while doing work that she can't talk about. This older man is a *bon vivant* who likes lipstick on his belly-button and has no money. Daughter Julia is homely, uncultured, nearing spinsterhood, yet has money. She's also naive and dangerously idealistic. *What could Paul possibly see in Julia?* thinks Pop McWilliams, and with good reason.

Were Paul and Julia isolated and out of touch?

Decades of secrecy, subversion and disregard for democratic principles *while claiming to uphold them* can turn people a little weird. Lies turn people weird.

The wheels fell off for Paul and Julia when Paul's close friend and OSS colleague, Jane Foster, got wind that she might be nabbed for spying for the USSR and fled the USA. Paul and Julia kept in contact with her while she was on the lamb, which didn't look good for USIA's top exhibitions man. But there were other problems. According to Julia, one of his associates reported him as a sexual deviant. *Completely untrue!* the indignant wife cries. Whatever the truth is about Paul's pants or his loyalty, in 1959 he was pulled from Germany and sent to Sweden, then retired in a rush: just months before he could have secured a $3000 per month pension.

Why the rush, Paul? Perhaps we'll never know.

This series of events precipitated a 'wounded' period in Julia's life, where she felt the evil forces of the GOP, McCarthy and Nixon were in an unholy alliance against her. She undertook to fight these forces of darkness however she could.

Let's read an excerpt from an anti-McCarthyite letter that Julia Child wrote, of which she is particularly proud:

> *In Russia today, as a method for getting rid of opposition, an unsubstantiated implication of treason, such as yours, is often used. But it should never be used in the United States… I respectfully suggest that you are doing both your college and your country a disservice… In the blood-heat of pursuing the enemy, many people are forgetting what we are fighting for. We are fighting for out hard-won liberty and freedom; for our Constitution and the due processes of our laws; and for the right to differ in ideas, religion and politics.*

Maybe, Julia, your work for Donovan, your husband's propaganda work, the *very probable* espionage work of your beloved friends, have done your country a disservice. Maybe, in the blood-heat of getting your own way, you've worked to undermine freedom and the due process of law.

Whatever you think of FDR, the US and it's allies during WWII or Soviet Russia, it's worth keeping in mind concepts like "the balance of powers" and "rule of law" are not just pretty words on a piece of paper. These concepts are valued because without them, there's little difference between an American President and a European Dictator. So even if you've got powerful friends, your opinions still need to be vetted by democratic bodies like Congress and the Senate BEFORE they're acted upon. That's what living in a democracy means. Hiding behind "the need for secrecy" is like a cancer patient refusing to take his chemotherapy, because "this could weaken me for a little while."

And thanks to books like *The Haunted Wood*, we now know all that secrecy actually made the OSS easier to penetrate by really virulent organizations.

I'm not saying that intelligence operations are incompatible with democracy, but they ARE incompatible IF they are given completely free reign to do what they want. The only real check on them is a free media and working Congress, which is a whole different Gordian Knot.

I can *kind of* understand why Julia would adopt a siege-mentality toward Pasadena and her dad; then toward Washington D.C. and the "McCarthyites"; and finally toward France. With McCarthy, the congressional investigations into the OSS and CIA spending, the FBI (and even CIA, thank you Angleton) investigations into Soviet espionage, Julia saw FDR's pink edifice crashing down around her. She understood that the USA was not, yet, her private game reserve. So naturally, she set up

fort in the Peoples' Republic of Cambridge.

For readers who are unfamiliar with US politics and geography, Cambridge Massachusetts is like that very sheltered, damp spot in your garden where all sorts of strange fungi can flourish. And Julia flourished there; the rest is T.V. history.

We have a problem in the USA: we've come to believe our own propaganda. You can disapprove of demagoguery. You can disapprove of propaganda and political-witch-hunts. But you can't disapprove of these things and still support the Childs, because the Childs are just another flavor of McCarthyites– and that may even be too kind to Julia and Paul, because I don't think Senator McCarthy ever took up service for a foreign operative– wittingly or otherwise. But sadly, I believe these ethical distinctions will be forever lost on the good comrades of Cambridge, MA.

When it boils down to it, Julia did not love her own people. Did she feel that they denied her something which she deserved? Did she feel out-of-sync, being homely and mannish? Or did she just crave belonging to something 'special'– irrespective of what that 'something' was? I guess it doesn't matter now, because like her father, she's dead. *Eh bien, l'affaire conclue.*

LEAVE A COMMENT

A CHINESE TALE

I had a friend who, several years ago now, served as part of the US infantry in Iraq. He hurt his back after driving over a land mine and now he can't walk properly. He also had some stress issues, went to see a doctor about it, and was diagnosed with one of those nebulous 'traumatic stress' diseases. My friend had a hard time finding a job because of the "mentally ill" diagnosis and now pays astronomical health insurance premiums. (He pays them, not the USG. Recruits, you have been warned.)

My friend's burdens are, sadly, the sort of burdens you'd expect to hear a 23-year-old veteran talk about. He would talk about other things too, more twisted things.

Like the strange, violent mercenaries who he would fight along side. People from all over the world who didn't speak any English or have any respect for life. Debased people. People who were there fighting because they were promised US citizenship, or *other things*, on completion of their tour.

He would talk about the creepy Iraqis who were allowed on base to sell bizarre goods to soldiers, such as "super-caffinated" chewing gum– chewing gum that you always want more of.

There are wars that people are prepared to fight, and then there are wars where the top brass scrapes together whomever they can, however they can. I'm writing about this today because I read *A Chinese Tale* by Mikhail Bulgakov over the weekend, and it made me think of my infantry friend and his mercenaries.

A Chinese Tale has not been widely published because it's an unflattering story about a drug-addicted Chinese immigrant in Russia who ends up fighting for the Red Army. He does more than fight for them, he finds his level in the Red Army.

Bulgakov knew something about war. During the Russian Civil War, he fought with the Imperial Russian/constitutional-monarchist White Army against the Bosheviks and Ukrainian Nationalists. This may seem strange readers, considering that Bulgakov was Ukrainian (or at least born in the Ukraine) and everybody wants self-determination, right?

The truth is more complicated, and Bulgakov had little confidence in the Ukrainian Nationalists ability to self-rule. (I've made it clear what he thought of the Bolsheviks.) Cynical people might say modern Ukrainian politics have proven Bulgakov right: where the Russians step out, the Americans step in– and who really benefits from that? Certainly not my infantryman friend.

But back to "the Coolie" of Bulgakov's story. Nobody knows how he got to Russia, he seems to have blown there like a dry leaf. He doesn't know why he's there either: he can't understand anyone around him, and more sinisterly, he sees people as opportunities to get something. "The

Coolie" makes his rounds amongst other Chinese expats and Russian low-lifes; dodging the Cheka, stealing what he can. But, once all the cocaine and opium have been used up, he finds himself in a sticky situation. He can't get any more charity. He's swapped his winter clothes for booze and drugs and wakes up in a flour sack:

> *It isn't known what happened in the little two-storied house over the next four days. It is known that on the fifth day, the coolie, now about five years older, emerged into the dirty street, no longer in a sheepskin coat, though, but in a sack with "Storeroom No. 4712" stamped in black on the back, and not in smart yellow shoes, but down-at-heel ginger ones, out of which peered his big toes, red with mother of pearl nails. On the corner, beneath a crooked lamp-post, the coolie looked in concentration at the grey sky, waved a hand decisively, and sang out to himself, like a violin:*
>
> *"Red arm me…"*
>
> *And strode off in an unknown direction.*

"The Coolie" has learned from a fellow Chinese drug addict that you can get things for free if you join the Red Army.

So off "The Coolie" goes, and does very well for himself. He impresses the other soldiers with his ability to swear in Russian, though he still can't understand a word the Russian-speakers are saying. "The Coolie" is given food, clothes, tea, tobacco, and most importantly, respect for his machine-gunning skills. He learns to demand more pay. And all he has to do in return is shoot his machine gun at waves of enemy cavalry– more men who he doesn't understand.

The story ends when White soldiers surround "The Coolie", who was abandoned by his Red commander during his first engagement. "The Coolie" won't stop shooting and he dies muttering something about how he hasn't been paid.

A Chinese Tale is not a nice story, but it's a powerful one, and is one that should be read more widely– especially by young Americans.

LEAVE A COMMENT

THE ENTERTAINER

I like my writing frozen on a stick. It's convenient.

I've been thinking about writing for the better part of a year now. Sometimes I get sidetracked by publishing, or psychology, or media-as-statecraft, but on the whole, I've been pretty focused. I have to be. I don't have much time.

There are a few things I've learned a writer should do *if he wants to be read.*

1) Flash fiction, or at most, short stories. If you must write a book, make it a collection of shorts. After you have a successful body of short works, then you can think about a novel.

2) Humor is best. Even if it's dark humor. Humanity doesn't have the cycles for another Dostoyevsky.

3) Confessional, colloquial writing style. Above all, the reader wants to pretend that he's having an intimate conversation with an attractive person. Not necessarily a beautiful or good person, mind you, an *attractive* one. Attractive can be pretty ugly.

4) Write with immediacy. Use lots of quoted speech, direct action and no George-Eliot-style descriptions.

5) If you're going for poetry, it needs to have musicality. That means structure, rhythm, and yes, even rhyme.

6) Have something real to write about. If you don't have anything to say beyond what you were told in college, go home.

Now that I have all this knowledge, all I have to do is use it, right? Well, there is one more mountain to climb. To be read, you have to reach readers. There are thousands of small lit mags trolling around for material; most of what they publish is pretty boring, imho, and their sites seem to

get even fewer hits than mine does.

Yet, I've found most of my favorite living authors through on-line lit mags. The key here is that these authors submit short works widely– widely enough for me to find them, even when 95% of what I'm wading through is junk. So let's add a seventh point to that list:

7) Write prolifically.

Then finally…

8) Submit prolifically.

Most lit mags editors don't really know what they want. They try to write sexy-sounding submission guidelines, but most of it's just fluff. Fun game: read what mags publish, then go back and read what they asked for.

Submit prolifically and ignore lit mags' submission guidelines *that aren't formatting related*. Genres are rough-hewn. Remember, slush readers– like all readers– just want to talk to somebody attractive. I know, I'm a slush reader. Which reminds me I have a whole cartload of that to do.

LEAVE A COMMENT

THE SCHULTHEIS NOTEBOOK

Herman Schultheis

A long time ago I wrote about Soyuzmultfilm and the Russian animation tradition– in my opinion, these cartoons are a national treasure and among the best things to come out of the USSR. Sadly, the US didn't produce anything comparable, but that doesn't mean we *couldn't* have, with some German help.

By the time Soyuzmultfilm got started, Walt Disney had made enough money to branch out into some very innovative projects, most notably, *Fantasia* in 1940. The film wasn't an *initial* commercial success, and in the following years Disney kept the company afloat (just!) by producing war propaganda for the US government, so artistically interesting projects weren't funded.

Ironically, America's chance at a Soyuzmultfilm-like achievement died on the the vine because of a shortage of money. Or, at least in part because of a shortage of money. Perhaps more important than financial concerns was that Disney's *Fantasia* rubbed influential people like Dorothy Thompson the wrong way, and new inspiration was required.

But all of that political ugliness doesn't detract from Disney's artistic achievement with *Fantasia*. It's a remarkable film, with an amazing array of innovative animation techniques, thanks in part to a man named Herman Schultheis.

Schultheis was born in Aachen and held a Ph.D. in mechanical *and* electrical engineering. He was artistically inclined, an excellent pianist and cultivated a circle of musical friends including Richard Strauss. Schultheis immigrated to the USA shortly after receiving his Ph.D.; read about his toaster incident here. Like Nikola Tesla, Schultheis learned about America the hard way!

Schultheis quickly became a rising star at Disney Studios. It's unclear to me how many of Disney's special effects were thanks to Schultheis alone, but he clearly had an encyclopaedic knowledge of the processes involved and his after-hours documentation suggests he felt some personal ownership. Either way, without his notebook, no one would know how Disney Studios achieved the spectacular effects they did.

Take for instance, the image below.

Fantasia was one of my favorite movies as a child. I would try to draw the characters, but for some reason, my pastels never had the vivid, glowing colors that the film had. No matter how I smudged and mixed, they never sparkled like they do in the movie.

Herman's notebook tells why. The frame above uses at least two exposures. The first exposure is of a hand-drawn image, the second exposure, the exposure which provides the 'scintillation', is of strategically-placed metal filings which reflect different colored lights. When the two exposures are superimposed, you're left with a twinkling web. Nothing like that can be achieved with pencils or pastels, the closest you'll get (outside of film) would be paints using structural color.

Schultheis' notebook is a treasure-trove of information, from the use of multiplane cameras, to light-bending glass, to image-distorting mirrors and even track-based mechanical effects. Schultheis' fundamental understanding was that film captures a slice of light, and therefore animation can benefit from light's special properties.

I wish Disney would publish Schultheis' notebook in its entirety, but it seems that the closest we'll get is a selection chosen and explained by John Canemaker, due out in 2014. Get a taste of what's to come here.

Herman Schultheis worked with Disney on *Pinocchio*, *Fantasia*, *Dumbo* and *Bambi*. Some sources add *Snow White* to that list too. He left Disney in 1941, hopefully because 20th Century Fox offered him better opportunities, and not because Disney's collaboration with Washington poisoned the working environment for someone of German descent. Whatever the reason, Disney turned down Schultheis' offer to buy his notebook for something like $300. Nearly fifty years later, the company (probably) paid Howard Lowery considerably more. Lowery got the notebooks from a Catholic order of nurses, to whom Schultheis' widow willed her estate.

Schultheis died in mysterious circumstances. He was an avid traveler and amateur anthropologist, who made a habit of solo-expeditions to Tikal in Guatemala. One day in 1955 he walked into the jungle and didn't walk out again. *The Milwaukee Journal* reported that a body was found, but they could not confirm that it was Herman's or give a cause of death.

The most comprehensive account of Herman Schultheis' life that I can find is an obituary published by his colleagues at Librascope, a military contractor, where he worked until his death. Schultheis was employed as a technical research librarian, probably interpreting intellectual property documents stolen by Americans from Germany after the war. This is what his colleagues had to say about him:

> *If your Mayan gods have reclaimed their own, Herman, we will miss you for your happy smile and your jokes, we will miss you for the part you have played in maintaining the spirit of Librascope, because we think you are irreplaceable.*

2 COMMENTS

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

"…there'll be tight-rope walkers, a donkey show, and John Wayne Gacy…"

There's something very attractive about powerful writing. When I find it, I always want to know more about the author, so I read author biographies. On my part it's a compulsive need to double-check that I'm understanding them correctly.

Today I'm reviewing *Mikhail Bulgakov: A Critical Biography* (1990), by Lesley Milne. Lesley Milne was not a 'Bulgakov scholar' when the British Government paid her to write this book, but she'd written a 55-page memo on *The Master and Margarita* back in 1977. If she was an expert on anyone, it was Quentin Tarantino's artistic great-grand-pappy, Vsevolod Meyerhold. Lesley's first real book, *Russian and Soviet Theater, 1905-1932* , didn't come out until 1988 and was co-authored by the preeminent Meyerhold scholar Konstantin Rudnitsky.

Meyerhold and Bulgakov had mutual animosity, so Whitehall's choice of biographer is an 'interesting' one.

I don't want to cheat the Tarantino fans who accidentally stumbled onto this blog, so I'll get to the point about Meyerhold. Meyerhold was the Bolshevik Government's golden-boy theater director. His work was a fusion of circus and Grand Guignol, which means a certain De

Sade-tinged miasma hung around the director, the same miasma which now clings to Hollywood. (Chew on that, Blip.) You could say that Meyerhold's product was a higher-brow version of what Tarantino offers today.

Bulgakov found Meyerhold's work smutty and unintelligible; the author lampooned the director in *Fatal Eggs* (1927) by imagining Meyerhold's death: crushed under a pile of naked Boyars from one of his own stage productions. (In fact, Meyerhold *was* crushed by his own revolution, and died in one of Stalin's labor camps circa 1940.) On the other side, Meyerhold thought Bulgakov was a dangerous anti-revolutionary.

Now for Lesley. Lesley is mindlessly devoted to Meyerhold. There isn't one critical word about him in this book, while she makes no attempt to understand Bulgakov's world view. (Where Bulgakov agrees with Meyerhold, he's a "connoisseur", where the author disagrees, he's a "mock-philistine", because nobody with talent can *seriously* question Meyerhold's genius!)

I should let Lesley do the talking:

> *Towards the end of that first theatrical season 1926-27 Bulgakov was even being approached by the doyen of the 'revolutionary' theater, Meyerhold, who had declared* Zoyka's Apartment *to be downright 'dangerous' and had said of* The Days of the Turbins *that it should have been produced not by MAT but by himself, Meyerhold, for he would have 'staged the play not as the author wanted but as public opinion required'. This statement was pasted into Bulgakov's cuttings album with a large exclamation mark, the import of which is clear. It must, however, have been enormously flattering to have been asked by Meyerhold for a play, not least because it completed the run of leading Moscow theaters in Bulgakov's hand that season: the Moscow Art Theater, The Vakhtangov, the Kamerny– and now Meyerhold too.*

Quite, Lesley, quite.

In fact, Lesley has open animosity for Bulgakov. Prof. Milne is in the same political camp as Frances Stonor Saunders. She has a soft spot for the revolutionaries who Bulgakov satirizes; and deep down, she believes that if it hadn't been for Stalin, the Russian Revolution would have been a step forward for humanity. So, yes, *Mikhail Bulgakov: A Critical Biography* is a hash-up.

The timing and message of Lesley's book make me believe that Whitehall knew exactly what it was buying.

The 1990s were a heady time for Soviet researchers, because Glasnost brought a lot of 'opening up' and declassification. From the cover of *Mikhail Bulgakov: A Critical Biography*:

> *This is the full, post-glasnost critical biography of Mikhail Bulgakov (1891-1940), a great comic writer whose works are now regarded as modern classics both in the Soviet Union and in the West. It is only very recently that all Bulgakov's works have been published in the Soviet Union, where his literary rehabilitation is regarded as an important barometer of glasnost. A flood of hitherto concealed biographic information has also emerged.*
>
> *This account of Bulgakov's career as a playwright and prose writer makes full use of these new sources.*

So I hoped against hope to get a flood of information from *M.B.: A Critical Biography*, but instead I got a grade-school analysis of Bulgakov's writing, geared for those who are unfamiliar with his work. If any of my readers studied English Lit in the U.K., they'll know what I mean: a tedious catalog of recurrent imagery, such as Bulgakov's use of of the color red, or 'opera', or 'card playing'. Reading Milne's book is like watching an idiot savant sort his stamp collection.

When you focus exclusively on trivial details, you risk missing the point.

But in fairness to Prof. Milne, *the point* was to miss the point. Let me explain that more fully.

Milne had a lot of information to work with, not just for this book (her first real, *solo* book), but for the range of books on Bulgakov she wrote throughout the 1990s. Glasnost, Yeltsin's eagerness to open archives to foreigners and bitterness in former-satellite states meant a wealth of formerly-classified and politically sensitive information was open to Westerners. If you want to draw comparisons, imagine what the 'Family Jewels' meant to US intelligence in 1973.

So from a historian's standpoint, the 1990s were the best of times. From the perspective of any remaining Cold-War government, however, the Russian information thaw was a potential political nightmare. Embarrassing and delegitimizing in the extreme. And just like in 1970s America, this information thaw had to be contained. (Remember who published John Marks' first book *The CIA and the Cult of Intelligence,* which he co-authored in 1974 with an ex-CIA-agent? It was Alfred Knopf!)

So back in the 1990s, stomachs churned in the Halls of Power. Enter Prof. Lesley Milne, and other academics like her.

Before her books on Bulgakov, Prof. Milne had published very little. (Her entire academic output before '88, as far as I could find, was 55 pages in a research memorandum in the 1970s.) That level of output is career-killing by modern American standards.

None the less, Milne was made head of Slavonic Studies at the University of Nottingham; and published profusely throughout the 90s. Her placement and lack of professional record were assets. She was in an excellent position to interpret the wealth of Soviet information for laymen like myself: being department head and having *so little baggage–*

quite a feat for a Cold-War-Era academic.

Interpret is what she did. The thrust of *M.B: A Critical Biography* is to explain to the reader how a political interpretation of Bulgakov's work is an impoverished one, because nobody in the 1910s or 20s could have possibly seen how the Soviet experiment would end. Therefore, political interpretations are simply readers' own views projected onto the past, especially if those political interpretations don't reflect well on the revolution of 1917.

Spymasters of the *Deutsches Reich* would disagree.

Instead, argues Prof. Milne, an appropriate interpretation of Bulgakov's work looks at its theatrical elements. Why? Well, haven't you heard? Meyerhold's theater is where it's at.

It rankles Lesley– it makes her blood boil– that Bulgakov is now remembered as the preeminent voice of that generation instead of an author who thinks like she does. The most she can concede to Bulgakov is that taste is a reader's call, and that we can't be sure if Bulgakov's fame will last until the year 2040. 2040 exactly, Lesley? If the apartment on Sadovaya Street is still a mecca in 2041, does that mean you were pig-headed and blind?

Whitehall's probably pleased with Prof. Milne. There is **no discussion** of the relationship between Pilate and Kaifa in *Mikhail Bulgakov: A Critical Biography,* which was published by Cambridge University Press. Lesley has managed to misdirect scholarship on Bulgakov's work with a book so boring that even a die-hard Bulgakov fan like myself had to struggle to get through it. I'm sure that many inquiring minds have been deadened.

Mikhail Bulgakov: A Critical Biography was published in 1990 and is now an old book. Lesley's old too, and is (probably) enjoying academic retirement on a pension that is less comfortable than what she hoped for back in the 70s.

But there *is* a silver-lining to almost everything. I'm going to leave you with a few quotes from the book; quotes I believe are diamonds shining through the muck and which go some way toward explaining Bulgakov. Perhaps Lesley's tombstone should read: "I am part of the power which forever wills evil and forever works good."

——

Bulgakov's thoughts on the Bolshevik Revolution, circa 1919:

Now, when our unfortunate native land lies at the uttermost depths of the shame and misery into which it has been plunged by 'the great social revolution', many of us are increasingly dogged by the same thought.

The thought persists.

It is dark and gloomy; it looms up in the consciousness and imperiously demands an answer.

It is simple: what will become of us next?

Its emergence is natural.

We have analyzed our recent past. Oh, we have studied very thoroughly almost every moment of the past two years. Many of us have not only studied them but cursed them as well.

The present is before our eyes. It makes us want to close them.

Not to see!

There remains the future. An enigmatic, unknown future.

What will become of us indeed?…

Recently I had occasion to look through several issues of an illustrated English magazine.

Enchanted, I looked for a long time at the marvelously reproduced photographs. And thought, thought for a long time afterwards…

Yes, the picture is clear!

Colossal machines in colossal factories feverishly devour coal day and night; thundering and clanging they pour streams of molten metal, they forge, repair, construct…

They are forging the power of the peace, replacing those machines that so recently sowed death and destruction as they forged the power of the victory.

In the West the great war of great peoples is over. Now they are licking their wounds.

Of course they will recover, will recover very soon!

And everyone whose mind has at last cleared, everyone who rejects the pitiful delirium which believes that our malign illness will spread to the West and infect it, everyone will perceive clearly the mighty surge of the titanic work of peace which will carry the Western countries to unprecedented heights of world power.

And we?

We are falling so far behind that none of the contemporary prophets can say when we shall ever catch up and whether we shall catch up at all.

For we are being punished.

It is inconceivable for us to construct anything at the moment. Before us lies a hard task– to conquer our own land, to claim it back.

The time has come when we must pay for our past. The heroic Volunteer Army is ripping the Russian earth piece by piece out of Trotsky's grasp.

And everyone, everyone– both those who are resolutely carrying out their duty and those who huddle in the distant rear, in the towns of the south, imagining in their bitter error that the salvation of the country can be accomplished without them– everyone is longing passionately for the liberation of the country.

And it will be liberated.

For there is no country that does not have heroes, and it is a crime to think that our native land has died.

But there will have to be much fighting and much spilling of blood, because as long as the madmen whom Trotsky has befooled continue to tramp behind this ominous figure with weapons in their hands, there will be no life but battle to the death.

We have to fight.

And so, while there, in the West, the machines of construction are clattering away, here, from one end of the country to the other, it is the machine guns that will clatter.

The madness of the last two years has thrust us on to a terrible path and we cannot stop, not even to draw breath. We have begun to drink the cup of punishment and we shall drink it to the dregs.

There, in the West, countless electric lights will sparkle, airmen will bore through the conquered air; they will be building, researching, printing, studying…

And we… we shall be fighting.

For this is unalterable.

We shall be conquering our own capital cities.

And we shall conquer them.

The English, remembering how we covered the fields with bloody dew, beating Germany, dragging her back from Paris, will loan us more greatcoats and boots so that we can march to Moscow faster.

And we shall reach Moscow.

The scoundrels and the madmen will be driven out, dispersed, destroyed.

And the war will end.

Then the bloodied, ruined country will begin to rise again… Slowly, and with great difficulty.

Those who complain of 'tiredness' will, alas, be disappointed. For they will become even 'tireder'.

We shall have to pay for the past with unimaginable labors, with the austerity and poverty of our lives. We shall have to pay, both literally and metaphorically.

To pay for the insanity of the March and October days, for the Ukrainian separatist betrayers, for the way that the workers were debauched, for Brest, for the insane use of printing presses to print money… for everything!

And we shall pay.

And only very late in the day shall we again construct anything that will make us equal in rights, so that we shall be allowed again into the halls of Versailles.

Who will see these bright days?

We ourselves?

Oh, no. Our children, perhaps, and perhaps our grandchildren, for the sweep of history is wide and it 'reads' decades as lightly as separate years.

And we, representatives of a hapless generation, dying still with the status of miserable bankrupts, will have to say to our children:

'Pay, pay honorably, and remember eternally the social revolution."

*(*Future Prospects*, by Mikhail Bulgakov, from a Grozny newspaper, November 1919.)*

Of course, to Lesley, this writing is "second-rate", "derivative" and "inflammatory". It's certainly one of those things, and the article will probably strike bells with modern Americans.

On Bulgakov's short period of government approval:

In Bulgakov's 'American days', as he referred to them, he

> *hob-nobbed with the American, French and Turkish ambassadors– in the presence, of course, of the diplomatic entourage of spies and informers.*

If you'd like more information on what this quote means, please read my post Is the Devil a German?

Finally, on the public reception of *The Days of the Turbins*:

> *Despite all the alterations made in the summer and autumn of 1926, in the final text of* The Days of the Turbins *the heroism and the romance still adhered to the Whites and to them alone. There was a section of the theater-going public that was profoundly grateful for this. MAT's traditional audience, the intelligentsia, responded with relief to this portrayal of the White officer not as physically or morally degenerate but as honorable and noble in his defeat. It was not unknown for people to faint during the performance; many had lost brothers, husbands and fathers who had fought with the Whites. In the other hand, those on the Red side were blazing… The weight of the press was behind the latter group.*

Readers may wonder why Stalin liked this play. His opinion was at odds with most of the critics, because he felt that the stronger the Turbins looked, the more glorious the Bolshevik victory. Stalin was more comfortable in the security of the revolution than the vast majority of apparatchiks.

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